



## The Unidentified Learning Problem

The effects of anxiety on the learning process

By Rachel Rosenholtz, LCSW

Chanukah has finished and the long winter months lie ahead. We all know that that means a whole lot of school. While most kids are able to flourish in school, what of the children who don't?

**Sarah** is a bright student who studies for hours for her history tests, yet barely passes. She does well in other subjects, has no known learning disabilities, and seems to understand the concepts discussed in class. Sarah tries and tries and eventually she gives up on studying altogether. Her teachers believe that she is lazy and could be doing better.

**Ben** can't seem to spell and has a difficult time grasping math concepts. He too has no known learning disabilities.

**Rebecca** has difficulty reading out loud in class. She stumbles over the words and cannot articulate a coherent sentence. When asked to repeat what she read in her own words she is appears unable to do so. The teacher spends most of the time correcting her.

**David** fools around in class and does everything in his power to avoid doing assignments. He is constantly distracting the class with his antics and the teacher finds it impossible to convey a lesson. He doesn't do the homework and hands in blank tests.

**Dina** has been receiving extensive tutoring to help her keep up with her class, yet she and her parents are frustrated because they are not seeing sustained results. She may learn enough to pass a test but what about future exams? Will she forever need to be tutored?

The parents of these children know that their child is smart and capable, yet something seems to be holding him or her back from succeeding in the classroom. Many of these children do very well in some subjects, yet poorly in others. This phenomenon is often explained by stating that every child has his or her weakness, not every child is destined to be a math whiz, and the struggles are accepted at face value. But this explanation does not help the child. After all she is still expected to learn the information and take tests in the subject. At times these students are viewed as being lazy, unmotivated, or acting out in order to get attention.

What many educators and parents may be unaware of is how actual subject matter itself can affect a child emotionally. Teachers are given over the enormous task of teaching challenging material to a wide range of students. As we know every child has his or her own unique temperament, some children are naturally more sensitive or nervous than others, and these personality traits will affect how a child copes with challenging subjects. For one child the challenge of learning new things may be exhilarating while for another it may induce anxiety. It is easy to see how some subjects can make children feel a bit nervous. Some anxiety is okay. Anxiety, in healthy amounts is what encourages us in general to perform well and focus on what needs to get done. However, not all children have developed the ability to regulate their anxiety levels. For some students,

anxiety can get out of hand and actually inhibit their ability to learn and focus. This can give way to the development of Academic Anxiety. According to the National Institution of Health 25.1% of 13 to 18 year-olds suffer from anxiety. It is well known that younger children suffer from anxiety as well.

There is an intrinsic connection between the emotional state of a person and the effect it has on his or her working memory, namely the person's ability to process and store new information.

A quick summary of the biological process of information comprehension: We experience everything in our lives through our senses. The experience then enters an area in the brain known as the limbic system. This is the area that deals with our emotions. If we feel emotionally secure or good about that which we have processed, the information will continue up to higher levels of our brain which control the working memory. The information is then processed and stored away. If the limbic system interprets the information or situation as threatening, it shuts down and the information never makes it to the higher processing levels in the brain. Therefore, a child who experiences this will be unable to process any information. It is not that the child is intellectually incapable, but rather that he mentally cannot process it. Additionally, in an anxiety-provoking situation, because the limbic system has shut down, the ability to access stored information is greatly inhibited. It is through this processing mechanism that emotion directly impacts the comprehension and retrieval processes.

### **The "Weak" Student**

Priscilla L. Vail M.A.T., a renowned Learning Specialist, consultant and author of numerous books on the topic of emotional and learning issues, explains that children “faced with frustration, despair, worry, sadness or shame lose access to their own working memory.” “Anxiety is the enemy of memory, and sadly in many of today’s classrooms we see children whose intellectual energies and capacities are drained by negative emotional states. Emotion is the on/off switch for learning.”

This is how, if the material is overwhelming and anxiety provoking, a child can study hard for a test without actually processing much of anything. The student thinks she is learning the material because she is reviewing the information but in reality the information does not reach the working memory portion of the brain. Essentially the child has spent hours learning nothing. Imagine the frustration the child must experience when she gets to the test and feels as though she had not studied a thing. This issue will also make tutoring far less effective. The student can be taught the information in many different ways but if the information itself is anxiety provoking she will have an extremely challenging time absorbing what the tutor is trying to teach her.

The same is true for retrieving learned information. An example of this, which every educator should be familiar with, is test anxiety. If the child feels anxious in the testing environment or has a difficult time working under pressure he may not be able to retrieve the information in an efficient manner, if at all. The child, not understanding what is happening to him, can begin to see himself as incapable and a failure. This child knows that he could do better, yet does not understand that it is his emotional state that is obstructing his ability to succeed. This in turn sabotages his self-esteem.

This problem is compounded when a child has a negative experience with a given subject. It is entirely possible for a child to have such a negative experience that he actually becomes traumatized by the subject itself.

Traditionally, people tend to view trauma as experiencing a life altering situation such as a natural disaster, abuse, witnessing violence or having a near death experience. It is well known that a person who has experienced a trauma can develop emotional problems, usually in the form of depression or anxiety. The root of the emotional distress is the fact that the traumatic event caused a person to feel so helpless and vulnerable that the person loses faith in his abilities. These feelings can give rise to insecurities and loss of self-esteem and self-confidence. Because these feelings can be so uncomfortable, oftentimes the person will do whatever can be done to avoid the situation, place, or event that reminds him of what happened.

In the same way, when faced with a subject that is traumatizing, a student can feel helpless and eventually stop trusting his ability. Such students are forced to confront their traumas every day of their academic careers. Think about the impact that must have on them. As with other forms of trauma, there will be a natural aversion to the traumatic situation and feelings. As a result of Academic Trauma, students like David avoid subject related activities and assignments. They will do whatever it takes to avoid having to confront the traumatic subject, such as acting out in class to divert attention, even if it means getting into trouble.

### **An Example**

I shared this concept with a friend who happens to be brilliant and she confided in me that she cannot spell “to save her life.” She told me the following story: When she was in second grade she did poorly on one spelling test, it was the first time she ever did poorly. The teacher commented on the poor mark in front of the whole class, perhaps because it was so unlike her. She felt humiliated and was traumatized by the experience. She told me that she never realized it, but after hearing what I had to say, she was convinced that what had happened to her in second grade was the reason she could not spell - or believed that she could not. She told me that when she had to spell her mind would freeze up and she never did well in the subject.

### **Another Example**

A girl could not read out loud in class. She tried to avoid being called on, but inevitably it would happen. When asked to read she would stutter and stumble over the words and it sounded as though she was incapable of reading. Upon exploration she realized that as a young child, when she would practice reading out loud, the person she read to would quickly lose patience with her and exhibit frustration whenever she made a mistake. This anxiety inducing situation made her feel so bad about herself that her reading performance was greatly affected. The more anxious she felt the more mistakes she made and a vicious cycle was created. As an adult, reflecting back on the experience, she realized that she had actually been traumatized by her initial “read out loud” experiences. She had developed a strong anxiety and fear of reading out loud. In a pressurized situation (like in front of teachers and classmates) her mind would freeze up and she was practically incapable of reading the words on the page, let alone verbalizing them. In contrast, when she had been alone or with someone who made her feel capable and confident, she had always been able to read out loud properly.

I find that if kids do poorly in a subject early on in their academic career, often, they believe they cannot succeed in it. The reason for their lack of performance may not have been their fault or have anything to do with their intelligence or abilities. They are “traumatized” by their initial experience. Perception is a powerful

factor in determining someone's personal reality. Despite their being capable, the mere fact that they believe they cannot succeed is enough to inhibit future success.

With this in mind, parents and educators can have some idea of how anxiety can sabotage a child's learning experience. What makes this such a tricky issue to deal with is the fact that the symptoms of anxiety can mimic the symptoms of ADHD or other behavioral or learning issues which makes it difficult to diagnose. Because anxiety robs a student of her ability to focus she appears to be spaced out. Another child may come to class unprepared because they are subconsciously avoiding the subject, or are so preoccupied with their fear of the subject they forget what materials are needed for it. This can manifest itself as an organizational issue. Still other compounding issues are the physiological symptoms that come along with anxiety such as upset stomach and headaches. Just the physical symptoms alone can effect a student's ability to focus in class or do well on tests.

A second issue is that a teacher has to educate different types of students and an approach that actually motivates one child to learn and do well can create anxiety in another.

A third issue is that children do not have the emotional maturity to understand what it is they are experiencing, they only understand that they are feeling bad. Children are masters at avoiding things that make them feel uncomfortable. They will come up with all sorts of excuses as to why they are not performing well, which can be highly confusing for parents and educators.

### **What can be done:**

The first step is being aware of the issue.

The second step is for parents to know their child's personality type. If their child tends to be sensitive and takes things to heart or is more of a "nervous type", then that child is at a higher risk of developing academic anxiety.

An understanding parent or teacher can encourage a child to talk about how the subject makes him feel. Often just by talking it out and seeing that his feelings are validated can help the child begin to overcome his anxiety. This can be especially helpful early on when learning difficulties first become apparent and are not yet deeply rooted. In the early stages a child can be taught relaxation techniques and learn to identify triggers. They can also be shown that the false perception of their ability is unfounded. If the problem goes undiagnosed for too long a child's belief system can become so ingrained and the anxiety so acute that professional intervention may be needed. The sooner an intervention is put into place, the easier and faster a child will be able to overcome their lack of confidence and anxiety, and the quicker they will start performing at their peak!

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